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Japan Economic Newswire

February 13, 1999, Saturday

LENGTH: 577 words

HEADLINE: Bin Laden providing money, military aid to MILF: report

DATELINE: MANILA, Feb. 13 Kyodo

BODY:

International terrorist Osama bin Laden continues to provide not just financial but direct military aid to secessionist Muslim rebels in the southern Philippines' Mindanao Island, a confidential military report stated.

The report, which traced the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) foreign fund sources, also said that bin Laden sent military experts from Sudan, Egypt and Afghanistan to train MILF rebels in handling explosives, commando tactics and other guerrilla welfare techniques.

A handful of Indonesian and Malaysian extremists are also among those being trained at the MILF's Camp Bushra in Butig, Lanao del Sur Province, the report said. Intelligence officials say the training began last November and would be finished in April.

Among the foreign experts are a former Sudanese colonel whose expertise is explosives, while the Egyptian and Afghan trainers are veterans of the Afghan war against the Soviet Union, it said.

The report said that MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat has direct links with bin Laden through a group organized in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, called Ikhwan al-Muslimin or Islamic Brotherhood.

Bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian millionaire, is wanted by the United States for the bombing of its two embassies in eastern Africa last August, which killed 240 people. A 5 million dollar reward has been put up by the U.S. government for his arrest.

The confidential report said the Jeddah-based Islamic Brotherhood, represented by Ustadz Muslimen, is being used by the MILF leader to coordinate and solicit funds for the rebel group.

Last September, Muslimen facilitated the visit of Saudi Arabian businessman Hussain Mustapha to Camp Abubakar, the MILF's main jungle base in Barira, Maguindanao Province, the report added.

Mustapha delivered money to the MILF, which used it to set up an international satellite communications system inside the base as well as a web page in the Internet, the report said.

Mustapha is known to be an associate of Mohamad Jamal Khalifa, one of bin Laden's brothers-in-law.

The Philippine military says Khalifa himself is instrumental in funneling funds to the MILF and the extremist Abu Sayyaf Group, another Muslim rebel faction in Mindanao, through a relief agency he had set up in the southern Philippine city of Marawi more than seven years ago.

The relief agency, International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), is a local branch of the Jeddah-based social agency of the Muslim World League, the report said.

Japan Economic Newswire, February 13, 1999

The IIRO is suspected by Western intelligence agencies to be bin Laden's conduit to various terrorist organizations in Islamic countries, like the Muslim Jamaat Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and Syria, the Pakistan-based Jamaat al-Islami Party and Jamiat-i-Islami Party in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

The MILF leadership has admitted receiving donations in the past from bin Laden for the building of mosques and Islamic schools for poor Muslim communities but they said the donations stopped after bin Laden became involved in the Afghan war in the late 1980s.

The government and the MILF have just concluded preliminary talks to end decades of hostilities in the southern Philippines and President Joseph Estrada has said he is willing to meet with MILF Chairman Salamat when he visits Mindanao from Feb. 25 to 28.

The other Muslim rebel faction, the Moro National Liberation Front, signed a peace agreement with the government in 1997.

LOAD-DATE: February 13, 1999

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Time of Request: April 20, 2005 12:05 PM EDT

Print Number: 1862:41361099

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